APPENDIX THREE

Proverbs 22:6—Promise … or Threat?

The Tradition

In Chapter 8, I called Proverbs 22:6 a "warning." When I wrote that, in my mind I could hear some readers bursting out—

> " 'Warning'? But … I love that verse! It's a precious promise. It means that, if I teach my child about God, and then he strays from God the moment he has the choice, he's still saved anyway, and will eventually come back to God. I even told little Bucky that. Are you saying that I was wrong?"

If that is your understanding of this verse, hang on to your hat. This, in my judgment, is one of the Bible's most frequently misused (and mistranslated) verses. But it is an important verse, given how deeply parents are invested in their children.

Hildebrandt nailed it: "This proverb has brought encouragement, hope, anxiety and guilt to countless parents who have faced the uncertainty and p 354 confusion of child-rearing."[1] The question I mean to pose and answer is: Is this verse a promise, or a warning?

Let us survey an array of translations of Proverbs 22:6—

> Train up a child in the way he should go;
> and when he is old, he will not depart from it. (KJV)[2]
>
> Train children in the right way,
> and when old, they will not stray. (NRSV)
>
> Train up a child in the way he should go,[3]
> Even when he is old he will not depart from it. (NAS)
>
> Start children off on the way they should go,
> and even when they are old they will not turn from it. (TNIV)

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[1] "Proverbs 22:6a: Train Up a Child?" (*Grace Theological Journal* 9 [1988]), 3.

KJV King James Version

[2] So similarly ASV, ESV, RSV, NIV, CSB.

NRSV New Revised Standard Version

[3] Margin, "literally according to his way."

NAS New American Standard Version (1977)

TNIV Today's New International Version

Educate a child according to his life requirements;
even when he is old he will not veer from it. (MLB)

Though the versions display some variations, they are nearly unanimous in adding a modifier to "way" in Line A. That is, the translations take "way" as specifically the *right* way, the *morally obligatory* way—"the way he should go," or "the right road."

The Bare Bones

But now, by contrast, consider an extremely literal translation:

Initiate for[4]-the-child on-the-mouth-of[5] his-way;
even-when he-is-old he-will-not-turn from-it.

Very different, isn't it? The terse wording bristles with questions. How does "initiate" mean "train"? Where did the "should go" go? It just says "his way," no modifier beyond the pronoun—no "good" or "right" or "should go." What kind of way is "*his* way"? Whose way? God's way? The child's way? I'm just a parent. What am I supposed to do? Help!

p 355 Traditionalism

As we begin our study, then, note the discerning words of Douglas Stuart: "The more well known a wording in the Bible is, the more hesitant modern translations are to depart from it."[6] Stuart is exactly right.

That said, let us commence our study, an examination which will illustrate the correctness of Stuart's point, particularly when it comes to the familiar words of Proverbs 22:6.[7]

TWO POPULAR VIEWS

The Majority View

The Meaning of the View

MLB Modern Language Version

[4] Or *to*, or *with respect to*. See explanation below.

[5] An idiom meaning *according to, after the measure of*. See explanation below.

[6] Douglas Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 52. Stuart is referring specifically to Proverbs 22:6, for which he favors the same translation and interpretation that I will commend.

[7] I have combed many commentaries, and have been surprised at how frequently the interpretation of this verse is simply asserted, with very little wrestling with the actual words of the Hebrew original. Waltke is a notable exception, though I disagree with his conclusions; Kitchen, Longman, and Clifford also interact more with the wording, with diverse results. Garrett manages both to note the Hebrew, and to be unhelpful.

What must we parents do, according to this view? We must train up a child in the way he should go. What way is that? It is God's way, the way of wisdom and righteousness.

To get that meaning, we must take the Hebrew's literal wording "his way," and replace "his" with some sort of modifier such as "good" or "right" or "he should go."[8] Note that most of the translations listed above modify "way" very similarly. Specifically, notice how many translations feature some form of the phrase, "the way *he should go*."[9] Likewise, commentators assert that the reference must be to the right way, the proper way, the way of wisdom.[10]

p 356 ***Absolute promise***

What will happen if we translate and understand the verse in this way? To many Christians, Proverbs 22:6 gives us an ironclad promise.[11] Solomon here allegedly allows that our child may sow his wild oats in adolescence or early adulthood. Still, a godly parent is encouraged to cling to this verse's promise that the child will turn back one day. Perhaps it will happen when he is literally "old," in a deathbed-style conversion, or re-conversion. Though the lad might stray, he will one day return to his childhood teaching.[12] It's a "precious promise."[13]

Promising general principle

The absolutist form of this view is not easy to find in print, even among advocates of modifying "way" as suggested above. However, Waltke uses the language of promise: "In sum, the proverb promises the educator that his original, and early, moral initiative has a permanent

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[8] Longman sees some such insertion as an interpretive necessity here (commentary, 404–405).

[9] The Spanish-language LBA has "Enseña al niño el camino en que debe andar," "Teach the child the way in which he ought to walk."

[10] Cf. Sid S. Buzzell, in John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983; Logos version). Cf. also Fox, *Proverbs*, 2:698. Donald Hustad wants to include good table manners, other Christian virtues—and music (article "A Spiritual Ministry of Music Part III: Music for Worship, Evangelism, and Christian Education," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Volume 117, 468, 311 (Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1960).

[11] As noted in Chapter 8, Fugate speaks of this verse as a "guarantee" that proper parental training will be successful (http://www.foundationforbiblicalresearch.org/CT%20excerpt%203.htm/).

[12] So John P. and Judy V. Allison, "Parenting as Discipleship," vol. 29, *Ashland Theological Journal Volume 29*, 52 (Ashland, OH: Ashland Theological Seminary, 1997).

[13] Warren W. Wiersbe rightly observes that the verse does not promise a departure and return; but he says that it is a promise that if parents raise their children in God's ways, the children will not stray (*Be Skillful*, An Old Testament Study [Wheaton: Victor Books, 1996], 105. Then in a footnote later on the same page, Wiersbe adds that it is a principle, not an ironclad guarantee.

effect on a person for good." However, Waltke adds, "But that is not the whole truth about religious education."[14]

Yet Waltke's exposition goes along the lines of presenting the proverb as an assured principle. He notes the word translated "even," and (contrary to the popular view) opines that it "probably aims to prevent the misinterpretation that there may be a moral lapse between the dedication and old age."[15]

Most commentators quite correctly point out the nature of Proverbs as presenting principles and aphorisms, not legal promises. For instance, John A. Kitchen favors modifying "way" as above.[16] But Kitchen then asks, "Does this dogmatically demand that, if proper parenting is employed, all children in the household will walk with God obediently?" Kitchen's response is sensitive and p 357 pastoral, as he reminds both of the general-principle nature of proverbs and of the mystery of the interplay of God's sovereignty and human volition.[17]

Summary

The majority view sees Proverbs 22:6 as a promise that, if a parent will train a child well, that child will stay with that training. This is the dominant view, imbued with the force and tenacity of tradition and the seal of the beloved KJV. If truth were decided by majority vote, the "precious promise" interpretation would win hands-down.

However, there are significant and convincing reasons to reject the majority view.

The Problems with the Majority View

I see at least two major flaws in the majority view.

First: unwarranted additions

This flaw is nearly fatal, all by itself. It is simply this: *Solomon provided no modifier beyond the pronoun.* That's right. There is *nothing* in the Hebrew text—not one word, syllable, jot or tittle—that corresponds to or justifies the "should go" that most translations insert.[18] The only word

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[14] Waltke, *Proverbs*, 2:206. He had earlier observed that "the proverb ... must not be pushed to mean that the educator is ultimately responsible for the youth's entire moral education," and alluded to the fact that youths can still make disastrous choices in spite of their training (ibid.).

[15] Waltke, *Proverbs*, 2:205.

[16] Kitchen explains it as "the way one ought to go, the right way, the divine way, the wise and righteous way" (496).

[17] Kitchen, *Proverbs*, 496–497.

KJV King James Version

[18] In spite of this, the modifying phrase or some form of it is inserted by KJV, NKJV, ASV, RSV, ESV, CSB, NRSV, NAS, NIV, TNIV, and NEB, among many others. It is also seen in the translations by commentators Murphy (163), and McKane (245).

that modifies "way" is the pronominal suffix meaning "his" (*darkô*). This is a simple fact of reading, not an interpretive assertion.[19]

"His way" = "God's way"? Whose way is "his" way? The original text provides nothing like a capital "h" to tell us whether it is "his way" (i.e., the child's way), or "His way" (i.e., God's way). Indeed, the Hebrew text has no capital letters, so such an indication is not even a possibility.[20] Therefore the Hebrew text does not and cannot indicate its meaning by font-variation.

p 358 However, we must now ask: What in the wording of the verse itself would ever have suggested that "his way" meant God's way? Remember, these proverbs do not have context, per se. They stand alone. We cannot go to the preceding or following verses to find out whose way is "his way," as we might in an epistle or a narrative. We can consult the context of the larger book to see if a given interpretation clashes with the author's thinking, however.

Whose way? That said, does the proverb itself suggest a referent for "his"? Indeed it does. "The child" is the closest referent: start out *the child* according to *his* (i.e., the child's) way, Solomon writes. In terms of the verse itself, "his way" is neither difficult nor ambiguous. It is the lad's way that we have in view.

We can nail this down still more tightly. Faced with difficult interpretive choices, I invariably find it helpful to ask myself: How could each competing view have been better-said? If the Biblical writer had meant to say what this interpretation suggests—his *good* way, his *wise* way, his *godly* way—are these the best words in the best order? Or could he have said it more clearly and less ambiguously?

Longman, regrettably, brushes this principle aside. To begin with, his translation is odd, at best:

> "Train up youths [sic] in his [sic] path;
> Then when they [sic] age, they [sic] will not depart from it."[21]

In his comment, Longman notes that the verse "has some built-in ambiguities"—yet he goes on to say that translations are right to add modifiers such as "good," "right," or "should go"[22]—thus *removing* the designed ambiguity. Solomon was deliberately ambiguous, Longman says … but we'll fix that for him!

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[19] Allen P. Ross makes this odd comment: "The way the verse has been translated shows that there is a standard of life to which he should go" ("Proverbs," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 5: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, 1061 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991). Well, yes, that is what the *translation* suggests. But Ross (and I) are supposed to be basing our interpretation on the Hebrew text, not on a translation; and I shall show that the Hebrew text "shows" nothing of the kind.

[20] That is, "his" is not a separate word in Hebrew as it is in English. In Hebrew the personal pronoun (i.e., *his*) is commonly written as an appended consonant or two rather than a separate word. Here, it is indicated by the *-ô* of *darkô* ("*way-his*").

[21] Longman, commentary, 404. Without explanation, he pluralizes "youths," but retains the singular "his"; then again pluralizes the singular verbs in Line B, leaving "it" singular.

[22] Longman, commentary, 404.

One must ask how firm the basis is for being more specific than Solomon, the inspired author, chose to be. Not firm at all, I think.

Let us ask, then: How might Solomon have more clearly stated the majority view? How could he have said "according to the way he should go," or "God's way," as this interpretation maintains?

p 359 ***Second: clearer alternative Hebrew expressions available***

Solomon could have expressed the majority view clearly in quite a few different ways. After the later analogy of Isaiah 48:17, Solomon could have added the verb *yēlēḵ* ("he will walk" or "should walk"), which would have communicated the meaning represented in the KJV and others.

> Thus says Yahweh, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: "I am Yahweh, your God, the One who teaches you to make a profit, The one causing you to tread in the way *you should walk* [*maḏrîḵ^{a}ḵā b^{e}ḏerek tēlēk*]." (DJP)[23]

Though that would have made the verse long for a proverb, it would not have been impossibly long.[24]

Or again, Solomon could have used the phrase his father used in Psalm 25:12 (emphasis added)—

> Who is the man who fears the LORD?
> Him will he instruct in the way *that he should choose* [*b^{e}ḏerek yiḇḥār*].

Yet again, Solomon could presumably have used the phrasing of these verses from Psalm 119[25] (emphases added)—

> In the way of *your testimonies* I delight
> as much as in all riches. (119:14)
>
> Make me understand the way of *your precepts*,
> and I will meditate on your wondrous works. (119:27)
>
> I have chosen the way of *faithfulness*;
> I set your rules before me. (119:30)
>
> I will run in the way of *your commandments*
> when you enlarge my heart! (119:32)
>
> Teach me, O LORD, the way of *your statutes*;
> and I will keep it to the end. (119:33)

KJV King James Version

[23] The phrasing in Psalms 32:8 and 143:8 is very similar.

[24] Nine words as opposed to eight, counting the *maqqēf*-pairs as single words. The last verse in this chapter (Prov. 22:29) is a nine-word proverb.

[25] Assuming this psalm to be Davidic, or at least pre-Solomonic.

p 360 **Clearer phrasings within Proverbs.** Those are quite a few options, any one of which would have yielded the majority-view's meaning. But we need not stray from Proverbs itself to find alternate ways. Had he meant something other than the child's way, Solomon could have replaced the pronominal suffix with any of the following (emphases added):

> So you will walk in the way of *the good*
> and keep to the paths of the righteous. (2:20)
>
> I have taught you the way of *wisdom*;
> I have led you in the paths of uprightness. (4:11)
>
> For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light,
> and the reproofs of discipline are the way of *life*, (6:23)
>
> Leave your simple ways, and live,
> and walk in the way of *insight*. (9:6)
>
> The way of *the* LORD is a stronghold to the blameless,
> but destruction to evildoers. (10:29)
>
> A gray head is a crown of glory;
> It is found in the way of *righteousness* (16:31 NAS)
>
> One who wanders from the way of *good sense*
> will rest in the assembly of the dead. (21:16)

This is an impressive array. Solomon had a wide variety of options for making it clear that "the way" here is the good way, God's way—not the child's way. He used none of them. Instead, he spoke explicitly of "his way"—that is, the way of the innately foolish and sinful child.

Therefore, given that (A) the Hebrew does not include the words so many versions insert, and that (B) Solomon could have written that sense clearly had he wished to do so—why do so many versions include the words? Let us recall once more Stuart's sage observation: "The more well known a wording in the Bible is, the more hesitant modern translations are to depart from it"[26] Old habits die hard, even (especially?) for translation committees.

Nonetheless, we are about to see that the more deeply we examine the evidence, the less likely the traditional majority rendering appears.

p 361 The Age-Appropriate View

This view is not as popular as the majority view, but it has its advocates. It acknowledges that the "way" is the child's way, which is an improvement on the majority view. If we grant that "his way" is "the child's way," what are the implications?

NAS New American Standard Version (1977)

[26] Douglas Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster: 1984), 52.

This view advocates the position that a child's upbringing should be agesensitive.[27] Do not expect a teenager's capabilities in a toddler. Keep the child's level of understanding and ability in mind. The sense suggested is "according to the physical and mental abilities of the developing youth."[28] Garret advocates this view, but then sneaks in the previous option: "one should train a child using vocabulary, concepts, and illustrations a child can understand.… one should begin instructing a child in elementary principles of right and wrong as soon as possible."[29]

No doubt, there is wisdom in this thought. But is it what Solomon meant? Probably not, for at least three reasons.

First, this interpretation simply does not make good sense of Line B. Think of the whole verse's resultant meaning: start out a child in a manner appropriate to his age; even when he becomes old, he will not depart from—from what? From the manner appropriate to his age? From his abilities? He will always be like a five-year-old, a seven-year-old, a twelve-year-old? And if that view makes sense, is it even worth saying? As Clifford tersely observes, this view "neglects the young/old distinction of the saying and is banal."[30]

Second, if it is insisted that the sense is, "he will not depart from his training" instead of "from his way," reaching back to an insufficiently warranted definition of the verb which starts the verse, my response would be threefold:

1. "From it" most naturally refers to "according to his way" at the end of Line A, not "Start out," at its beginning. The verse is not chiastic.
2. The verb simply means "Start out"; the notion of "training" is at best derivative and not emphasized. Thus even if we are willing to reach back to the start of the verse, it would have to mean "he will not depart from the start he was given."

3. This meaning (his age-abilities) does not suit the uses of "his way" in Proverbs, as I am about to show.

Third, this view is at variance with Solomon's other uses of "his way" in Proverbs. Let me explain and illustrate.

What is the meaning of "his way" in Proverbs?

One might wonder whether the translators were influenced by the manner in which Solomon uses "his way" in Proverbs. Perhaps there is some special nuance that indicates "his way" = "God's way," or "the right way"?

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[27] This is Garrett's view (*Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, electronic ed., Logos Library System; The New American Commentary [Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001], 187–88). So also Delitzsch, 2:86–87, and Lawrence O. Richards, *The Bible Reader's Companion*, electronic ed., 391 (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1991).

[28] Waltke, citing also Saadia, Malbim and Delitzsch (2:205).

[29] Garrett, 188.

[30] Clifford, 197.

This exact form of the word, *darkô*,[31] occurs eight times in Proverbs.[32] In every one of those cases, it means exactly the same thing. There is no variation. The word *always* means "the way [the person] chooses," unless something nearby expressly indicates otherwise.

Here are all seven other occurrences (excluding 22:6):

> "The LORD possessed me at the beginning of his work [lit. "of His way," i.e,. the way He chose to take],
> the first of his acts of old." (8:22)
>
> The righteousness of the blameless keeps his way [i.e., his chosen lifestyle] straight,
> but the wicked falls by his own wickedness. (11:5)
>
> The wisdom of the prudent is to discern his way [i.e., the way he will choose],
> but the folly of fools is deceiving. (14:8)
>
> The heart of man plans his way [i.e., the way he will choose],
> but the LORD establishes his steps. (16:9)
>
> p 363 The highway of the upright turns aside from evil;
> whoever guards his way [i.e., his path, his choices and actions] preserves his life. (16:17)
>
> When a man's folly brings his way [i.e., the way he chooses] to ruin,
> his heart rages against the LORD. (19:3)
>
> A man's steps are from the LORD;
>
> how then can man understand his way [i.e., the man's own way, course of life]? (20:24)

Note that every occurrence refers to the way chosen by the subject, with no moral/spiritual connotation inherent in the word itself. Note too, that in every case, with the sole formal exception of 16:17, "his" is specified by a substantive that is named in the very same line. In no case is the referent of "his" an actor not named in the verse—as we must suppose of 22:6 alone, if we take "his way" as meaning "Yahweh's way" or "God's way."

Resultant meaning of "his way"

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[31] I say "word"; *darkô* is *derek* ("way") plus the third-personal masculine suffix—*ô*: thus, "way-his").

[32] Proverbs 21:29 is a possible ninth, as some manuscripts and versions read "his way" in the place of "his ways" (cf. Waltke, *Proverbs*, 2:169). The plural represents the addition of the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet. If the original reading was singular, it would have the same meaning as all the rest: the way he chooses. Translations are divided, with the singular represented by KJV, Geneva, Darby, CSB, NAS, and NKJ, and the plural by ASV, NAB, NET, NIV, RSV, TNIV, and ESV.

All of this leads us to this conclusion: in all other uses, *darkô* means "the way [the person] chooses." Therefore, as a simple finding of exegesis, it is most likely that "train up a child according to his way" in 22:6 means "according to the way he chooses," as in all the other verses. Is the referent for "his" named in Line A? Indeed it is: "a child."

As the simplest reading, "Occam's razor" would favor this interpretation. Had Solomon wished to express another idea, we have seen that he could have done so unambiguously in any of a number of ways.

But … does that make sense?

The data as to "his way" are fairly clear. But now it seems that we have an interpretive problem. If "his way" means "the way the child chooses," the verse would seem to clash with the remainder of Proverbs. As we have seen (and will reiterate), Proverbs *uniformly discourages* giving a child his own way, warning against such indulgence fiercely. Letting children have their way is a recipe for disaster, on many levels. Yet here Solomon says, "Start out a child according to his own way." Is that not a contradiction?

p 364 Indeed, no, it is not a contradiction. But before we untangle the knot, let us look at one other view.

Adaptive Training View

What I am calling the "adaptive training" view is a variation of the "age-appropriate" view, above. What is the meaning of Proverbs 22:6 according to this interpretation?

The Explanation

The *verb* translated "train up" is explained as creating a taste or a thirst within a child.[33] It has been more specifically suggested that this Hebrew verb means that parents should give the child a sweet taste of the faith when they're young.[34]

The *preposition* "in" is explained by Swindoll in a way that seems to try to combine in keeping with, in co-öperation with, in accordance to, and so according to his way.[35]

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[33] Cf. Charles Swindoll, *You and Your Child* (Nashville: Nelson, 1977), 19; and *Growing Wise in Family Life* (Portland, Multnomah: 1988), 90–91. Swindoll also tries to crowbar in the notion of bringing into submission (*You and Your Child*, 19). Swindoll bases this view on dubious etymology and usages never found in the Bible itself. As we shall see, the Bible simply employs the verb for inaugurating or dedicating something, starting it out.

[34] Jim Townsend, article "Grace In The Arts: Grace Abounding—In Great Literature," in vol. 3, *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* Volume 3, 2, 57 (Irving, TX: The Grace Evangelical Society, 1990).

[35] Swindoll, *You and Your Child*, 20. Cf. also Kidner, 139.

The *noun* "his way" is explained at length as the child's own manner, mode, characteristics, temperament, vocation, individuality or even his bent.[36] Old Testament scholar J. Barton Payne said that the verse "is perhaps more accurately rendered, 'Train up a child according to his way [i.e., by methods that are adapted to his own special interests and capacities], and [then] even when he is old he will not depart from it."[37] Swindoll is emphatic that it is not the parent's way that should rule, it is the child's way, as he explains it.[38] Others insist that it is the parent's *duty* to fortify the child's individual interests, habits, abilities.[39]

p 365 Here is what this view argues that God is telling parents: if you want your training to be godly and wise, then you must observe your child, be sensitive and alert so as to discover his way, and adapt your training accordingly.[40]

The Problems with the Adaptive Training View

There are, however, fatal problems with this interpretation.

As to the verb

For instance, this view's explanation of the verb translated "train up" is hopelessly muddled, further confused by throwing in meanings which are never found in Scriptural uses of the term. As I shall explain in a moment, etymology does not always determine a word's meaning. Nor is it valid to take a basket-full of senses and suggest that one use combines them all.[41]

Every one of the Biblical uses (apart from Proverbs 22:6) refers to the dedication of some building or other, as we shall see. The meaning is to start, to initiate, to inaugurate.

As to the noun

Reaching back to speculative etymology for a word (Hebrew *d-r-k*, "bend"), when the noun itself is never used that way, is an unsound way to approach interpretation.[42] One should always keep in mind: writers are communicators, not etymologists. They use words in the senses employed by their readers, not in line with some hypothetical origin in the dim, obscure past.

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[36] *You and Your Child*., 20–21; *Growing Wise in Family Life*, 90–92. Similarly Gene Getz, "The Christian Home Part II," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Volume 126, 502, 112–13 (Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1969). Getz simply asserts that this is the meaning of the verse, with no documentation or substantiation whatever.

[37] Article "Israel, Religion of," in Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1988), 1070.

[38] *You and Your Child,* 20; *Growing Wise in Family Life*, 91.

[39] Robert B. Hughes and J. Carl Laney, *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary*, The Tyndale Reference Library (Wheaton, IL.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 235

[40] . *You and Your Child*, 21

[41] . D. A. Carson memorably terms this error the "illegitimate totality transfer" (*Exegetical Fallacies* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984], 62).

[42] Carson refers to this as the "root fallacy (26–32).

For instance, if it could be demonstrated that "cute" had a word-origin meaning "bow-legged," we still would have no grounds for saying that men who call young ladies "cute" are really saying that they are bow-legged. A word means what it is *employed* to mean, not what its root originally might have meant to long-dead generations.

Therefore, the rationale for seeing the straightforward, very common Hebrew word *derek̲* ("way") as meaning "bent" simply is not there. More specifically, as we have seen, "his way" in Proverbs always denotes the way the person chooses to go p 366 or live. And Solomon uniformly counsels *against* giving a child his way. Verse after verse cautions *against* letting our homes become child-centered, child-led homes.

> The rod and reproof give wisdom,
> but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother. (29:15)
>
> Folly is bound up in the heart of a child,
> but the rod of discipline drives it far from him. (22:15)
>
> The way of a fool[43] is right in his own eyes,
> but a wise man listens to advice. (12:15)

As to the notion

The idea of parents following a child's proclivities or abilities is simply not found in Proverbs. Longman correctly observes that the view "clearly would not be supported by the understanding of the rest of the book that it takes work, discipline, and even physical coercion to encourage a person to take the right direction in life."[44]

As to the summary

And then again, there is the problem that this view is hopelessly muddled. What exactly is a parent to do? Are parents supposed to key their upbringing to their child's temperament … so as to bring him into submission? But, if the child is determining what parents do, then who is submitting to whom? Thus, it is difficult for fathers or mothers to know exactly what this view is counseling.

Even more damaging, what will the result be? The verse says, Train up a child according to his way (meaning his temperament, his natural "bent," in this view), and even when he grows old, he will not depart from "it." If the child will not depart from *it*, then: what is "it"? If "his way" in the Line A means "his natural bent," then what is it that the child will not depart from in Line B?

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[43] The word for "fool" here (*'ᵉwîl*) is related to the "foolishness" (*'iwwelet*) that is "bound up" in the heart of a child (22:15). In other words, the fool *always* thinks that his way is right—and that kind of foolishness is in the heart of a child. This latter fact is why the child needs, not indulgence, but "the rod of discipline."

[44] Longman, Commentary, 404

Does this view suggest that the child will not depart from his temperament? If so, what sense does that make? What if the child's temperament is harmful? What if he is hot-tempered, or lazy, or impulsive? Aren't all of us born sinners, and thus p 367 born with temperaments that are problematic at best? Would this not mean that I am to harmonize my upbringing with a child's sinful, destructive temperament?

We are forced to conclude that the adaptive-training view does not really do justice to the wording of the verse or the context of Scripture; plus, it ends up not making good sense.

WARNING VIEW (PREFERRED)

Translation

Extremely literal: Initiate for[45] -the-child on-the-mouth-of his-way;
Even-when he-is-old he-will-not-turn from-it.

Translated: Start out a youth according to his own way;
even should he grow old, he will not turn from it.

Interpretive paraphrase: Start out a youth after his own chosen way
—and he will never grow out of it.

Interpretation

Let's take this clause by clause:

"Start Out"

Meaning and usage

The verb translated "start out" is חֲנָךְ (*ḥ^{a}nōk*). It means to *initiate,* to *inaugurate,* or to *dedicate* (in the sense of dedicating a house at its first use). It is used only five times in the Old Testament, always with some kind of building as the object—except in Proverbs 22:6.[46] Naudé correctly observes, "Although usually rendered *dedicate*, a more accurate translation is *begin*, *initiate*, or *inaugurate*."[47]

Deuteronomy 20:5 will give us a feel for the verb's customary canonical use.

> Then the officers shall speak to the people, saying, "Is there any man who has built a new house and has not dedicated it [*ḥ^{a}nâḵô*]? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man dedicate it [*yaḥn^{e}ḵennû*]."

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[45] . Or *to*, or *with respect to*.

[46] Jackie A. Naudé, article חנך, in NIDOTTE, 2:200.

[47] Ibid. The related noun חֲנֻכָּה (*ḥ^{a}nukkâ*) occurs eight times, always with reference to dedicating part or all of the Temple, putting it to its first use.

p 368 We will understand the verse better after we set it in its context. In verses 5–7 of Deuteronomy 20, there are three humanitarian categories of exemption from service in a war. Each involves something that a man has achieved, but not had the opportunity to "get going":

1. The first is a man who has built a new house, but has not yet lived in it and fitted it out (v. 5).
2. The second is a man who has planted a vineyard, but has not yet been able to make use of its fruit (v. 6).
3. The third is a man who has become engaged to be married, but has not yet consummated his marriage (v. 7).

In context, then, verse 5 should not make us think of a formal "dedication" ceremony, but of simply beginning to use the house.[48] This command constitutes a gracious offer of exemption to prospective soldiers who had built new homes, but who had not yet started to live in them. The idea is that they had not settled into these new homes, they hadn't gotten them started up, gotten them up and going as homes. Also, the men had not had an opportunity to make the houses fully fit and livable for their families.

Apart from Proverbs 22:6, the only other uses of this verb are 1 Kings 8:63 and 2 Chronicles 7:5. Both of these deal with Solomon's *dedication* or *inauguration* of the Temple, which he accomplished by offering a huge number of sacrifices. Clearly, the emphasis is not on a dedication ceremony per se, but on the fact that Solomon got the Temple going, he started it actually functioning in the service of Yahweh.

Fundamental idea of the verb

The verb, then, has the meaning of getting something going, starting it out, getting it functioning. There is nothing inherent suggesting ceremonies, let alone rubbing the palate with dates or continued training per se as some have suggested. Applied to Proverbs 22:6, it would mean simply starting a lad out, getting him going, getting him functioning, according to his own way.

p 369 **"A Youth"**[49]

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[48] Cf. Peter C. Craigie, who points out that there "is no clear evidence ... for the practice of dedicating a new house in ancient Israel," so that the "proper use of the verb seems to be: 'to initiate; to begin to use' " (*Deuteronomy*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976], 272). Earl S. Kalland agrees, citing Rashi, Qunhi, O.S. Rankin, and S.C. Reif as forwarding the same view ("Deuteronomy," *Expositor's Bible Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992; used by permission]), 129. Kalland favors translations such as "take up residence," "start to live" (ibid.).

[49] The Hebrew is, too literally, "start out to-the-youth." The preposition rendered "to" simply marks the direct object of the verb (Waltke, *Proverbs*, 2:194 [citing his grammar book]). Waltke suggests that the definite article ("the") "may imply that he must be assessed individually to design personally the appropriate moral initiative" (*Proverbs*,

The noun *na'ar* is used in more than 250 verses in the Old Testament. It simply is not possible to come up with a refined, precise meaning of the word. As Hildebrandt notes,

> … the age span is so diverse that age cannot be the primary focus of the word. It is used of infancy: for a child yet unborn (Judg 13:5–12); one just born (1 Sam 4:21); an infant still unweaned (1 Sam 1:22); or a three month old baby (Exod 2:6). However, Joseph at 17—already a man in that culture—is also called a [*na'ar*] (Gen 37:2). When he is 30 years old—surely beyond childhood—he is still called a [*na'ar*] (Gen 41:12, 46).[50]

The noun *na'ar* is used seven other times in Proverbs.[51] Every occurrence depicts a child who is in need of instruction. In 1:4 and 7:7, it parallels "the gullible" (*p^{e}ṯayim*). In 20:11 the youth is a child who must reveal his character by his deeds. In 22:15 we see a child whose inborn denseness must be driven out by discipline. In 23:13, it is a child from whom a father must not withhold discipline. In 29:15, it is a child who shames his mother because he has been given his own way.

So we opt for "youth" as highlighting immaturity, without being too specific.

"According to"

The Hebrew phrase *'al-pî* very literally "upon the mouth of." It is of course an idiomatic expression, not to be taken any more literally than our phrase "tongue-in-cheek." Consider three common uses in Scriptures preceding Solomon:

p 370 1. It refers to the standard, the measure and controlling factor,[52] with the idea of *after the measure of, according to* (Gen. 43:7; Exod. 34:27; Lev. 24:12; 27:8, 18; Deut. 17:10–11).
2. *According to the command of* (Gen. 45:21; Exod. 17:1; 38:21; Num. 3:16, 39, 51; 4:27; Josh. 19:50; 22:9).
3. *At the mouth of* (Josh. 10:27 [a cave]).

This phrase, then, answers the question, How to start this child out? Answer: after a particular measure or standard. Then we must ask, After which standard? The next word supplies the answer.

"His Own Way"

2:205). Adapting the assumed interpretation, I would suggest that it indicates the particular child: if the child is started out with indulgence, that child will not outgrow it.

[50] Hildebrandt, 10. Hildebrandt himself argues for a specialized meaning in this verse of a young squire; as we shall see, that interpretation is no likelier than (say) "short-order cook."

[51] Proverbs 1:4; 7:7; 20:11; 22:6, 15; 23:13; 29:15, 21. See further in Chapter 2, under the fourth benefit promised in Solomon's preface.

[52] Cf. BDB, article פֶּה.

As we have noted at length, this translates the single word *darkô*, his way, the child's way, the way the lad chooses. That is the standard Solomon envisions.

But is this what Proverbs—let alone the rest of the Bible—promotes? Should children be allowed to choose their own way, their own values and operating principles, according to what is in their hearts? Is Hollywood right? Is "follow your heart" the real Gospel?

Not according to Proverbs, nor according to the rest of the Canon.

A child should be reared according to the standard of the Word of God (Deut. 6:5ff., Psa. 119:9, 11; among many others). As the expression of that standard, he should be reared in accord with the standard of parents who themselves have embraced and absorbed the Word of God (cf. Prov. 6:20–23).

But what is this verse apparently commending as the child's standard? Not God's way, but the child's own way.[53] And what way would that be? What does Scripture lead us to believe is the way that a child would naturally choose? Proverbs replies with one voice: he would choose the disastrous way of folly.[54]

Perhaps the reader is feeling dizzy at this point. Is this *true?* Is this a command—*in Scripture*—that we should start a child out according to his own standard? Not according to God's way, but according to his own way; his immature, foolish, sinful way?

The answer is a partial "yes." The verse indeed envisions letting the boy be and set his own standard, his own guidelines, so that he and not God (or the divine p 371 institution of parenthood) is the measure of his way. It means letting him concoct his own values, set his own pace, and formulate his own goals, using only his own human viewpoint as the measuring rod.

At this point, surely we feel like sputtering. How would this sort of "start" in life turn out? The modern, indulgent, New-Agey, child-centered notion is that the child's "higher nature" will win out, and he will properly find his own way within. Is that Solomon's view?

But we know that is not true. We know that the Biblical view is radically different. The Bible acknowledges the reality of inborn sin. We are all spiritually stillborn, brought forth dead in trespasses and sins, objects of God's wrath (Eph. 2:13). This is true of every one of Adam's natural descendants (Gen. 5:3; Rom. 5:12ff.).

How does that apply to child-training, in practical terms?

It means that our children *have* no "higher nature." Neither did their parents. Born of two sinners, by nature, folly is bound up with the child's mind (22:15). He will choose the self-willed way of destruction, which will invariably look good to him (12:15). His ultimate destination will be death (14:12)—*if* he is left to go "his own way."

Are you beginning to feel the tension? On the face of it, this verse is *terrible* advice! If we see in this verse an actual positive command—as so many have done—it is perhaps the worst child-rearing advice ever given. Why more expositors have not seen that is something of a mystery.

There is indeed a far better interpretation; but we will consider it after studying the rest of the terms.

"Even Should He Grow Old"

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[53] See further discussion of that phrase below.

[54] Combine Proverbs 12:15, 22:15 and 29:15.

The phrase translated "Even should he grow old" considers a hypothetical situation.[55] It is not a "given" that he will live to older age, given Proverbs' many warnings against waywardness (cf. 1:24–32; 10:21; 11:19; 14:12; 15:10; 19:18). p 372 This child may or may not survive adolescence. He may never "become old." But Solomon concedes the possibility, only to say that, if he does age chronologically, the youth will not naturally turn from the start his indulgent parents gave him.

"He Will Not Turn From It"

The other views envision this as an assurance that the child will not forsake the good upbringing he had, the good and godly training his parents gave him. In fact, some seem to read Solomon as if he had written, "Even when he is old, he will turn back to it (i.e., the good way)," in suggesting a later return.[56]

So far, the actual wording has not been friendly to this view. This verb, at the close of Line B, is no more favorable than the preceding words.

The verb *sûr* is used some seventeen times in Proverbs. It is used both of turning from something evil and of turning from something good. The majority views assume that it is used in Proverbs 22:6 of turning from something good—that is, from the godly upbringing of one's parents. The lad "will not turn" from his good upbringing.

However, actual usage is opposed to this interpretation. Of the sixteen other uses of this verb, *fully thirteen of them* (81 percent) are clearly of turning from evil to good. Let me break it down:

- Turning from evil to good in some form: 3:7; 4:24; 4:27; 9:4 (the gullible turning to Lady Wisdom); 9:16 (the gullible turning to Lady Folly—from bad to worse); 13:14, 19; 14:16, 27; 15:24; 16:6, 17; 27:22.
- Of turning from good to evil in some form: 5:7; 11:22; 28:9.

Given that 81 percent of the other occurrences speak of turning from evil to good, what is the likelier meaning in this verse? Couple the usage statistics with the fact that the notion is of the old person turning from his childish way, and the fact that the child's own way is always foolish, what is the likelier meaning of *sûr* in this verse?

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[55] The sense of the יְ in this case would be concessive (cf. HALOT), "Even though he grows old, he will not mature, he will not leave his indulgent ways." This answers Waltke's objection. Waltke says that taking this verse as sarcastic or ironic, while grammatically and rhetorically possible, "would then assume that the youth attained old age in his folly," which in Proverbs is a reward of the wise rather than of fools (Commentary, 2:205). However, the verse assumes no such thing. Solomon merely envisions a hypothetical: *even should he* attain old age, mere aging alone will not reverse this self-indulgent pattern. (Cf. also BDB, article גַּם.)

[56] Cf. hinted suggestions in Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, Pr 22:6 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996); and John MacArthur, *The Fulfilled Family* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1997), np.

Solomon is saying that, when a child is started out after the measure of his own chosen, foolish, godless way, even if he should manage to grow old, he will not turn from the evil of that way to the good of God's way.

p 373 What Kind of "Command" Is This, Anyway?

Hopefully, one feels at this point the impossibility of seriously taking this verse as a positive command. The odds that Solomon is actually urging parents to start their children out accustomed always to getting their own way, and thus cemented into a pattern of self-absorbed godlessness, are nil. There must be a better way of seeing the verse.

Indeed there is a better way.

Not a Command at All

Proverbs 22:6 must be regarded as an *ironic imperative*. In form, an ironic imperative is a command, but it is an *ironic* command. It is meant to make a point, *not* to produce the commanded action.

In fact, the intent of an ironic imperative generally is to produce the opposite of the literal sense of the command. This is a command that is not meant to be carried out. Bullinger explains the figure of speech of *irony* thus:

> The figure is so called when the speaker intends to convey a sense contrary to the strict signification of the words employed: not with the intention of concealing his real meaning, but for the purpose of adding greater force to it.[57]

Watson also describes the use of irony in Hebrew poetry. Though he does not mention Proverbs 22:6, Watson describes *irony* as a case in which taking a statement literally yields the exact opposite of what the statement's meaning must be.[58] Watson suggests that the way to identify irony is when the only way to make sense of a statement is to reverse its *prima facie* meaning.[59] This applies directly to the interpretation of Proverbs 22:6, where the imperatival meaning is indeed "nonsensical."

It is difficult to over-stress the importance of detecting irony, when it is present. Particularly in the case of this verse, virtually every phrase cries out against the standard interpretation, rendering it banal nonsense that clashes with p 374 the rest of the book and, indeed, the rest of the Bible. Watson warns us that failure to detect irony can result in completely misunderstanding a text[60]—which, I am arguing, has been the case with Proverbs 22:6.

In sum, to take a text such as this as an ironic imperative is the rhetorical equivalent of our "Oh, right—you do that [disastrous thing]. And when you do, here's what will happen!"

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[57] Ethelbert William Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*, 807 (London; New York: Eyre & Spottiswoode; E. & J. B. Young & Co., 1898). Logos version.

[58] Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 2nd edition (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986), 306–307.

[59] Ibid., 307.

[60] Ibid., 309.

"Ironic Imperative" Examples

The Bible contains numerous examples of ironic commands.

Judges 10:14. In Judges 10, we read that Israel "again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines," and that "they forsook the LORD and did not serve him" (verse 6). As a consequence, Yahweh abandoned them to their foes, who oppressed and crushed them (vv. 7–9). Israel was humbled and desperate, and we read that they "cried out to the LORD, saying, 'We have sinned against you, because we have forsaken our God and have served the Baals' " (v. 10).

How did Yahweh respond? He reminded them of His past blessings and their record of faithlessness, and said he would not save them (vv. 11–13). Moreover, He said this: "Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen; let them save you in the time of your distress" (v. 14).

What is this? Is Yahweh actually *commanding* them to worship and seek after pagan idols? Formally, yes. In grammatical terms, it is a straightforward command. Yet it is transparent that Yahweh means no such thing. Instead, He is convicting them of their sin by means of blistering sarcasm. They have left Him again and again for false gods; now, let those gods save them.

By this, Yahweh awoke them to the fact that those gods were no gods at all, and thus could not save. His irony brought them to humbled, broken repentance (vv. 15–16).

1 Kings 18:27. As a second example, we could consider Elijah's contest with the false prophets of Baal, in 1 Kings 18. The feat is to call on one's god(s), and "the God who answers by fire, he is God" (v. 24). First up are the 450 prophets of Baal, who are unable to bring fire from the false god by their performance.

p 375 Elijah mocks them.

> "Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." (v. 27)

Is the prophet actually commending the worship of Baal? Grammatically, yes; in reality, of course not. His command is *ironic*. Elijah is mocking them. What he is telling them to do is the opposite of what they should do, as Elijah is there to prove—and they know it.

John 2:19. Now turn far ahead to John 2:18–22. In this passage, the Lord Jesus has just taken his handmade whip and cleared the Temple. Affronted, the leaders ask him, "What sign are You showing us, since You are doing these things?" (v. 18 DJP). Jesus' response was "You destroy this sanctuary, and in three days I will raise it up!" (v. 19 DJP).

In grammatical form, the words of verse 19 are a command: "Destroy this sanctuary," Jesus says, as if He were commanding them to do it. Is He, though? Is He commanding them to kill Him—so that it is not a sin, but obedience, when they betray and frame and condemn the Lord Jesus? When they stand before the judgment of God, will they be able to plead innocence, and insist that they were simply obeying Jesus' command?

Of course not. Though the *form* of the verb is an imperative, the *impact* of the words are not as a genuine command, or an expression of Christ's moral instruction to His hearers. The action (crucifying Him, an innocent Man) would be a horrendous sin. Clearly the Son of God is not ordering someone to sin.

But once again, we know this from the context and other considerations, rather than from the sheer grammatical form of the verb *lusate* ("destroy") itself.

What Jesus means, then, is "You go right ahead and do the horrendous sin of killing Me; but I shall resurrect Myself." It is a statement laced with acid irony.[61]

Proverbs 22:6 as ironic command

Let us plug this into Proverbs 22:6. This verse comes after chapter upon chapter warning of the need to discipline children, and to head them in God's p 376 way instead of their own. Solomon has shown us that children are born ignorant, gullible, vulnerable fools. He and his readers knew that they were unclean products of unclean parents (Job 14:4), conceived in iniquity (Psa. 51:5), in need of discipline (Prov. 13:24).

Now, leaving off the frontal approach, Solomon employs irony. Perhaps he hopes to wake up the reluctant, indulgent, lazy parents. "Go ahead," he shrugs, in effect. "Do it. Give that lad his start in life expecting to go his own way and get his own way. See how that turns out. Oh, and by the way … here is how it *will* turn out."

A tragic aside: "Baby Man"

Have you ever seen an infant in a man's body? Perhaps you have seen immature children—but nothing like the late William Windsor, known as "Baby Man."[62]

Windsor was a 54-year-old man who came into a nice inheritance, and used it to finance a lifestyle as a literal baby, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Though formerly a singer and actor, Windsor popped a pacifier into his mouth, and took to wearing (and using) diapers and a baby girl's clothes, complete with curly blond hair and earrings. He slept in a crib, sat in a huge high-chair, and paid people to feed him. Windsor's bizarre story had an unsurprisingly sad end, when his long-dead body was discovered in his apartment. He was 57.[63]

Windsor's story is shocking and sad, and it is extreme.

Maturity is not automatic

But many folks who are chronologically adult, and give no alarming signs such as Windsor did, have never grown to attain wisdom. The body has matured, but the heart, the mind, has not.

Maturity is not automatic. The wisdom of fearing Yahweh must be impressed by parents with loving insistence by means of the rod and reproof. Wisdom must be embraced by the child by his choosing it, seeking it, gaining it, acquiring it, and holding on to it.[64] If a child is started out

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[61] Other instances of ironic (or sarcastic) commands include 1 Kings 2:22; 18:27; 22:15; Isaiah 2:10; Jeremiah 7:21; Ezekiel 20:39; and Amos 4:4–5.

[62] "Baby Man," by Joe Watson, in the *Phoenix New Times News* (June 9, 2005; URL http://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/2005-06-09/news/baby-man/).

[63] " 'Baby Man' William Windsor Found Dead in Home, Autopsy Underway," by Stephen Lemons, in the *Phoenix New Times News* (February 3, 2009; URL http://blogs.phoenixnewtimes.com/bastard/2009/02/baby_man_william_windsor_found.php).

[64] Cf. Proverbs 2:1–5; 4:5–8; 16:16.

"according to his own way," and p 377 left to that way, the aged baby will not just naturally "evolve" into God's way. It is not enough to provide a "nurturing environment" (as I once heard it put *in church*, to my alarm) and let the child find his own way.

Remember: *Proverb,* Not Dissertation

We must keep in mind that this verse is a pithy proverb. Accordingly, Solomon naturally does not mention the possibility of a work of God's grace changing the grown child's heart. True to the genius of proverbs, this verse is simply laying out the way things would naturally be—"You do A [indulge a child], and B [lifelong selfish immaturity] will follow!"

Jay Adams correctly says that the passage

> Literally … reads, "train a child after the manner of his way," that is, after the standard or manner in which *he* wants to be trained. The verse stands not as a promise but as a warning to parents that if they allow a child to train himself after his own wishes (permissively) they should not expect him to want to change these patterns when he matures. Children are born sinners and when allowed to follow their own wishes will naturally develop sinful habit responses. The basic thought is that such habit patterns become deep-seated when they have been ingrained in the child from the earliest days. The corollary to this passage is found in Proverbs 19:18 where the writer exhorts the reader, "Discipline your son while there is hope; do not set your heart on his destruction."[65]

An Odd Twist

Sometimes we can gain insight by standing a law or a proverb on its head. If God warns against a certain behavior, we can learn what we should do, instead, from figuring out what the *opposite* of that behavior would be. For instance, the commandment *not* to steal implies a corollary commandment to be gainfully employed; the prohibitions of adultery and false witness commends marital faithfulness and truth, and so on.

p 378 Accordingly, when we do that with this proverb, the meaning would be something like this:

1. If you start out a boy according to his own way, he will never grow out of it.
2. Therefore, do not start him out according to his own way; rather, start him out according to God's way.

So we see that, in a roundabout way, we are brought back to the doorstep of the Majority View. By discouraging us from starting out a child on his own way, Solomon implicitly directs us toward another way. That way would have to be *God's* way, the way of wisdom and uprightness. With this, many proverbs concur, including 4:11; 6:23; 9:6; 10:29; 12:28; 13:6; and 21:16.

I do not necessarily see a reverse promise that the child will not grow out of a godly upbringing, although it certainly is the grand hope of godly child-training. A consistently godly

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[65] Jay Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 158.

upbringing will confront the child with the whole counsel of God, and will provide the normal means used by the Spirit of God in our children's conversion and sanctification.

If a child so reared chooses the way of folly and of ungodliness, it will be in spite of his God-fearing parents' heartfelt prayers for grace, and their best, most earnest, and most insistent efforts to point him to the saving, sanctifying way of God. In the judgment, such a child will have no excuse.

Conclusion

The wise king wants to be sure he has reached us. Again and again he has modeled and stressed how we are all born fools, with no fear of Yahweh and no template for life. In our hearts are folly and the seeds of our own destruction.

Now Solomon lays aside the frontal approach and tries a new tack.

"You don't believe me?" he says, in effect. "You think your child is an exception? You think it best just to give him his lead, let him track his own course? Is it just too much trouble for you to love God, take in His Word, follow Him, and teach His ways to your child? Is it too hard to cross your child's will, to teach him, to reach out to his heart? Are you, after all, *not* wiser and *not* stronger than your child? Is it too hard to care, and work, and be consistent both in teaching and in discipline?

"Fine, then," Solomon continues. "Have it your way. Leave him be. Start him off thinking that there is no God to answer to, that there are no borders and no p 379 consequences, that there will be no day of judgment. Let him think it's safe to follow his own impulses, unjudged and unfiltered. Start him off following his own foolish heart, his own desires, his own drives. Start him off according to his own way.

"But I'll tell you this: even if he does make it to adulthood—which I can't guarantee—he'll never, ever turn from that evil way you started him on.

"Sound like fun?

"No?

"Then *don't do it*."

Solomon says all that—but he does it in eight words.[1]

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[1] Dan Phillips, *God's Wisdom in Proverbs: Hearing God's Voice in Scripture* (Woodlands, TX: Kress Biblical Resources, 2011), 353–379.